

Surrealism and the Cinema

Open-eyed Screening

Revised Edition



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A FEEL FOR THE SURREAL

INTRODUCTION

This is not a history of the Surrealist Movement, not a survey of Surrealist filmmakers or those filmmakers, past or present, who have been influenced by Surrealism. It is, rather, an exploration of how perception filters art through film to create the *experience* of surrealism; for surrealism, above all, is a sensibility.

Jean Cocteau, the 20th-century French writer, poet, playwright, artist, filmmaker (the definitive dilettante, some would say) commented that for him all films were surreal. This could mean he viewed films as fantasies, cultural or psychological (the view of 1940s avant-garde American film critic Parker Tyler). It is more likely, however, that Cocteau had something else in mind: that witnessing the movement of illuminated images on a screen was, in itself, a surreal experience; an experience that took him into another world. A different take on the experience of film viewing by another early filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, everyone's model of the surrealist filmmaker, when asked what his audience was to take from his films, said that every viewer was welcome to use his films as they found most useful.

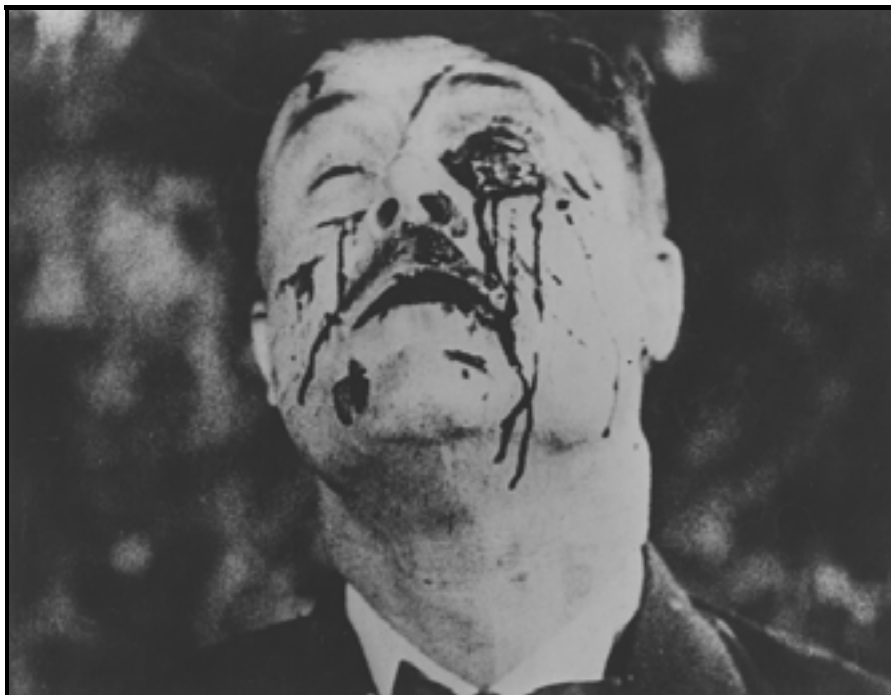
While Cocteau and Buñuel in their respective views acknowledge the role subjectivity plays in film viewing, Salvador Dalí, everyone's model of the surrealist painter, simply assumed *all* was subjectivity when he said, "Let everyone be able to read from things." ¹ A surrealist in the complete sense, Dalí played the part to the hilt, indulging his outrageous fantasies in a manner similar to the French mid-19th-century Symbolist writer (and influence

on early Surrealists), Gérard de Nerval, who was known to walk his pet lobster on a ribbon in the Luxembourg Gardens. Dalí mined everything for surrealism and, since the reservoir of surrealism is the infinity of the human mind, he found it everywhere. In the 1960s the Beatles recorded their surrealist album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and in "Yellow Submarine" sang, in Dalíesque spirit, "It's all in the mind."

For the viewer, a surreal film, even a surreal image or moment in an otherwise non-surreal film, initiates a play between the conscious and the subconscious, and it is through this interaction that surrealism affects the emotions. The film (image or moment) provokes an intense emotional response that becomes *too* much (*too* beautiful, *too* bizarre, *too* real) for the viewer, and so it can be called "surreal." Two examples from the films of Buñuel: in *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) a man wipes his mouth on his shirt sleeve and literally wipes his lips from his face (!). His woman friend nervously reacts by applying her lipstick. Back to the man and, while formerly clean-shaven, he now appears bearded and with moustache. The woman, clearly agitated, checks her armpits (she wears a sleeveless dress) and sees that her underarm hair has disappeared. She then, defiantly, sticks out her tongue at the man and waves him a saucy farewell. Freudian or symbolic analysis of this exchange, alone, would be pedantic as there is something more interesting going on here than obvious gender/genital transference. What really excites the viewer is the *manner* in which this couple enacts their battle of the sexes. The depiction is *exaggeratedly* bizarre; symbols have been *flaunted* and the audacity of this astounds us, making the moment surreal. In *The Young One* (1960) Buñuel has a lecherous man with apple in

hand, a young girl by his side. Leering at the girl the man bites ravenously into his apple, saying, "Now you're a *real* woman ...". Again, a symbol (apple = female virginity) is thunderously flaunted.

The experience of surrealism that comes from flaunting or exaggerated or excessive expression also occurs in Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* (1930) in the scene where a man and woman desperately attempt to make love on a garden seat. To the ever-swelling music of the "Liebestod" from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (a favourite musical motif of the director and, for this writer, one permanently associated with surrealism in film) the man passionately cries, "*Mon amour, mon amour*" while blood streams from his mouth and eyes, down his face. Here ecstasy and frustration, opposite emotions, are deliriously portrayed in this seminal example of the surrealist theme of *l'amour fou* (Mad Love).



L'Age d'Or: The agony ...



... and ecstasy of romantic love (*L'Age d'Or*)

In 1913 Marcel Duchamp, perhaps the 20th-century art world's greatest intellectual, created *Bicycle Wheel* (a found bicycle wheel and bicycle fork mounted upside-down on a wooden stool, allowing the wheel to spin), and in 1917 *Fountain* (a found porcelain urinal). These Readymades were to revolutionize our attitudes towards art. They were not only attacks on the Establishment and what Duchamp saw as the conservative in contemporary art, but also proclaimed – and for the first time – that art could be found anywhere, even in everyday objects. Duchamp's legacy concept ("Anything is art if an artist says it is.")² anticipated and influenced the new art forms of the 20th-century: the Happenings of the 1960s (the party as art); Pop Art (imitations of, and references to, advertising, comic books and popular culture); and

Conceptual Art and the Performance Art of the 1970s (for example, *Trademarks*, Vito Acconci's series of photographs of his self-inflicted bite wounds).

For Duchamp, no work of art was complete until confronted by the spectator, someone who would bring intelligence (perception and thought) to an artwork and, in doing so, give it meaning. This 'missing link' Duchamp called the “art co-efficient”³ and he likened it to the unexpressed but intended, and the unintentionally expressed, in the work. Duchamp saw the artist more as medium than art maker, without complete control over the work's end result. Therefore, an artwork, while being the expression of an artist's inner state was also conveying other things. It was this aesthetic osmosis between artwork and spectator that mattered for Duchamp, not the interpretation an artist gave to the work; and there was to be a *confrontation* between viewer and artwork.⁴ Duchamp's ideas had influence well beyond the visual arts; for instance, in the theatre of the 1960s when the invisible wall between actors and audience dissolved (an example being the finale of the American musical *Hair* when audience members were welcomed to join the actors on stage).

After Duchamp we not only began to change how we appreciated art but also began to question assumptions that art remained forever unchanged. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* cannot possibly be seen today simply as the portrait of a woman with an enigmatic smile (as it had been since it was painted in the early 16th-century). Today's viewers bring very different preconceptions (and perceptions) to the painting than did those of the past. Since its creation *Mona Lisa* has been revered for a variety of reasons while also becoming an easy target for iconoclasts: Duchamp, himself, 'attacked' her when he produced his own version

complete with beard and moustache (actually an altered *postcard* of the painting).⁵ Those tourists who today gather at the Louvre before the da Vinci original, capturing the famous smile on videotape or DVD, make a *moving* image of what was once only a static one. It may be that, through a further alteration of the image, Mona Lisa is at this very moment winking knowingly at her viewers in someone's home movies.

The theme of change in art can be seen similarly, sadly, in the story of Vincent Van Gogh, who could barely sell one of his (apparently pathetic and worthless) paintings during a lifetime of poverty, yet today millionaires would be hard pressed to afford one (of his stunning masterpieces). On another level, the music of the Rolling Stones is still appreciated while that of their contemporaries, Gerry and the Pacemakers, has been consigned to the scrap heap of Rock Music history.

It is more than changing perceptions and attitudes, this issue of change in art. Art, the concept, changes, is subject to metamorphosis, is ever-changing; and this idea of metamorphosis is crucial to an understanding of the surrealist sensibility. The great English film critic Raymond Durgnat, in a chapter of *Films and Feelings*,⁶ hinted at this when he raised the issue of whether *Un Chien Andalou* was a poem, because of its symbolic meanings, or a painting, because it could be interpreted as a set of pictures. By establishing that the film had the ability to metamorphose and *transform* itself *in the viewer's mind* (from poem to painting), he enhanced the film's beauty and power *as film*.

THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT

A full history of the Surrealist Movement can be found elsewhere. Briefly, however, Surrealism, as a manifestation of the social sphere of a group of artists, arose out of the ruins of the short-lived Dada Movement. Dada (1916 – 1923), starting during World War I, was aggressive, anarchic and inherently self-destructive. Though all these things it truly was, today it is difficult not also to see Dada as a bit naïve. Dada appealed to those artists who wanted, quite simply, to destroy all aspects of the Old World. Some of these artists, however, wanted to create a *new* world, and so Surrealism emerged; more optimistic than Dada, it would build on the rubble of the *Ancien Régime* and aim to "go beyond."

Early on Dalí wrote of the possibility "... to systematize confusion thanks to a paranoiac and active process of thought, and so assist in discrediting completely the world of reality."⁷ In other words, once old attitudes to reality were removed the comforting pabulum of contemporary existence would disappear and the Surrealist could use his or her own being to fill the gap. This, in the Duchampian sense, would be the meeting of the medium and the missing link.

The Surrealist Movement evolved (and revolved) around the French writer André Breton, a somewhat aloof, pompous man who, ironically, was referred to by his acolytes as "The Pope." "Ironically" because mocking the Catholic Church, along with the Establishment and all forms of convention, was one of Breton's main concerns. Poet, novelist and theorist, Breton was a magnet to a group of like-minded men (very few women – this being a bone of contention for many years).⁸ Besides serving as catalyst to the movement, Breton's major contributions were his *Surrealist Manifestos* (notably

1924, 1930) and the journal he edited, *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924 – 1929). Although Breton's own concerns were more literary than visual, he pronounced (and with delicious surrealist hyperbole) of *Les vampires* (1915), an early French silent film of a pulp detective serial, "In *Les vampires* will be found the great reality of the century."⁹ As visual artists moved from the Dada camp to the Surrealist camp, their influence became more apparent, then predominant, so that today it is the visual art of the Surrealist Movement of which we tend to think of first. And it is the visual art that more significantly flows on into film.

While the revolutionary consciousness of Surrealism had its origins in the anarchism of Dada, the movement's other main sensibility, its desire to *transcend*, grew out of late 19th-century Symbolism. French Symbolist painters Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau depicted *other worlds* (mystical and mythical) through evocation, suggestion and mood; and their work, and the work of other Symbolists, along with those of the artists of Art Nouveau, share this preoccupation with the Surrealists. In Symbolist literature Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Intruder* (1890), often called a "mood play," and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé expressed this urge to go beyond, to transcend.

By the 1920s cinema had made leaps and bounds towards technical perfection and so became the ideal medium for many Surrealist visual artists. Man Ray, Hans Richter and Francis Picabia were among the first to experiment in film with surrealism in mind. There were links between the experimental filmmakers and the Surrealists. Both René Clair and Buñuel started their film careers in partnership with 'official' Surrealists: Clair's *Entr'acte*

(1924) was scripted by Picabia, Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* co-written and co-directed by Dalí.

By the mid-1930s the seminal experimental Surrealist films had been made. Surrealism's influence came later to Hollywood where, in the mid-1940s, surrealist-inspired dream scenes were in vogue (for example, *Spellbound* and *Yolanda and the Thief*). For European painters and visual artists the attraction to the movement gradually waned, though its masters (René Magritte, Dalí, Ray, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst and others)¹⁰ continued to develop within its framework through their careers. For the English, Surrealism arrived a bit later, stayed a little longer. Today there are Surrealist groups of artists, intellectuals and academics the world over, some, unfortunately, imitators working Surrealism more as a genre rather than using it as a means to aesthetic revolution. The surrealist *sensibility*, however, and the ideas and feelings that informed the first Surrealists, still exist and that is what is explored here.

THE SURREALIST SENSIBILITY

The surrealist sensibility is concerned with, as it always has been, ways of perceiving and responding to reality, art and life. Though there may be various paths to surrealist consciousness, understanding these four interrelated concepts is crucial to reaching that destination: the importance of the object; the cerebral self; revelation of the marvelous; and subjectivity.



La Chambre d'Ecoute, René Magritte

The Object

That surrealism places objects at the centre of its world is apparent in the paintings of Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, whose recurring image of a man in a bowler hat appears virtually unchanged from one painting to another. These objects (bowler-hat men) are more than just symbols (of bourgeois society and its values); they are archetypes of Non-personality. It is the man-in-the-bowler-hat *object* that excites Magritte; not *the* man; not *man*.

Surrealists relentlessly pursue objects – or images of objects – with the same passion they yearn to transcend worldly realities. The surrealist becomes actively involved in the lives of objects, seeks to become one with them, even to *devour* them. In this the surrealist is the ultimate consumer. Dalí wrote about his desire to fuse with the object, in fact, to *eat* it;¹¹ and in later years he produced a cookbook (classic French cuisine, *bien sûr*) illustrated with surrealist photomontages and bizarre food stylings.

And so there are frequent depictions of edible objects in surrealist works: Dalí's paintings often have images of bread, fried eggs and milk; in the 1960s American artist Claes Oldenburg made a Pop Art giant, stuffed canvas hamburger, complete with stuffed canvas pickle slice; and Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka literally added cooking to his art practice. This is a kind of hedonism that complements the surrealist's other, cerebral, side.

Dalí wrote of the object going through four stages:¹² initially, existing outside oneself; then transforming itself into the shape of one's desire and acting upon one's contemplation; next, being acted upon; and, finally, inviting one to fuse with the object. This desire to merge with the object inevitably leads surrealists to pursue their *ideal* objects and so, like Kubelka, the insatiable surrealist finds him or herself continually searching for perfection; and the ideal becomes a kind of Platonic ideal; an archetype; the *ne plus ultra* of the object; or the object to the *nth* degree.

For Dalí, as for many of the original Surrealists, one ideal was found in the architecture of Art Nouveau's Antonio Gaudí, especially his church *Sagrada Família* in Barcelona. The pure escapism of the building shows such disdain for architectural convention

that its surrealist appeal can be easily appreciated. The church's construction began in 1887 and is only now just nearing completion; this time-span, itself, allowing for architectural metamorphosis to the *nth* degree. The building's changes can be seen looking at the Nativity Façade, which develops from pseudo-French Gothic at the base, with its three gabled portals and Art Nouveau organic decorations; up to the steeples, like honey-combed tapers, which are without precedent in style; and finally on up to their Cubist pinnacles; in its entirety appearing to be the work of a mad sandcastle builder.

Since "image" comes from the same Latin root as "imagination" it comes as no surprise that the mind, the repository of imagination, has a special part to play in interpreting images. The imagination's function in art is two-fold: used by the artist to conceive something out of nothing, the spectator uses imagination to interpret that something (Duchamp's art co-efficient). For the surrealist, whether artist or viewer, the imagination is a significant player in the game.

The Cerebral Self

Surrealism appeals to the imaginative part of the mind which is receptive to the irrational. This is illustrated in a phrase by the mid-19th-century French writer Isidore Ducasse (aka Comte de Lautréamont) ¹³ which Breton resurrected to neatly encapsulate Surrealism:

“Beautiful, like the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.”

This single phrase expresses the concept of the irrational juxtaposition of objects so crucial to an understanding of the surrealist sensibility. The thought arises, "What do a sewing machine, an umbrella and a dissecting table, have in common?" Nothing, we assume. In Ducasse's statement, however, they must because they are together: the very different worlds of tailor and scientist, quite rational separately, we find in the company of another unrelated object (umbrella), and by chance. Different worlds (other worlds) interest the surrealist and when these worlds are juxtaposed the resultant dissonance leads to self-questioning, conceptualizing and mind games. To the surrealist, already vulnerable to the persuasive powers of the object, such irrational juxtaposition provides the ultimate frisson.

The game of irrational juxtaposition works just as elegantly with *ideas* as it does with objects. Henry Miller, the American writer of *The Tropic of Cancer* and other ground breaking erotic literature, was also an astute observer of surrealist cinema. In *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, in which he documented his travels across the United States in the early 1940s, he notes one night a shop window display of nylon stockings: "Thus we see how surrealism penetrates to every nook and corner of the world."¹⁴ The display – a disembodied glass leg filled with water and a sea horse bobbing in it – was surreal to Miller not only because some Surrealist artists had used mannequins in their work – and what was a sea horse doing there anyway?! – but also, I contend, because he perceived the subtle juxtaposition of other separate realities: the lit, meticulously arranged theatre set of the display, its artifice intensified by the framing device of the window, with the shabby naturalism of the small town street at night. For Miller, irrational juxtaposition opened a door to surrealism.

The paintings of Magritte and his Belgian contemporary, Paul Delvaux, illustrate the relationship between the irrational juxtaposition of objects and mind games. Many a Delvaux landscape depicts the figure of a woman sitting, or reclining, in a room, the room set within a landscape; but outside the room, as the viewer sees it (perhaps through a window), a train travels on a direct line toward the ill-fated room. We might well ask ourselves, "Why did they build that house on a train track?!" Several of Magritte's paintings show a barren room whose space is fully occupied by a single, huge object (a green apple, a red rose), extending from ceiling to floor, wall to wall. The obvious questions arise: "How did they get that apple *in* there?" and "Is that a giant rose or is that a room in a doll's house?" This self-questioning, or conceptualizing, delights the surrealist and the double-take it provokes is the emotional payoff.

This idea of gamesmanship goes back to Breton, who created literary games for his friends. One, "How to catch the eye of a woman you pass in the street," consisted of five rows of black dots (periods) the width of a page. Some others were "How not to be bored any longer when with others" and "To write false novels." ¹⁵ Dalí, too, delighted in playful mind games and during press interviews might speak in a bizarre, made-up language or with illogic and non-sequitur so as to confuse or provoke the journalists.

The genre of painting called *trompe l'oeil* (deceive the eye) has a game-like, surrealist aspect. Though realistic painting inherently fools the eye (the tricks of perspective being used to make two-dimensional representations on a two-dimensional surface appear to be three-dimensional), in *trompe l'oeil*, and especially in the works of 19th-century American realist

painters John Peto and William Harnet, where the artists portray essentially flat surfaces (walls, doors, the insides of cupboards), the game is pushed to the limit. By severely limiting the depth factor (the relatively flat backgrounds) while keeping the objects (postcards, paper notes tacked to the walls, things like teacups hanging from hooks in the cupboards) equivalent in size to their actual size, these artists made the viewer question whether they were looking at reality or a depiction of it. When these artists are successful the viewer's excitement comes not only from having new aspects of the familiar revealed, but also from the *realization* that their *oeil* has been *trompe'd*. Magritte, too, frequently used *trompe l'oeil*; as in his painting *Euclidean Walks* (1955) which shows a window through which is seen an old world cityscape, the very scene depicted within the frame of an artist's canvas standing on an easel before the window, itself





Euclidean Walks, René Magritte

Revelation of the Marvelous

In Ducasse's statement (regarding the sewing machine, umbrella and dissecting table) before everything he puts "Beauty." What is the nature of this beauty? For Breton, "Only the marvelous is beautiful."¹⁶ Sergei Diaghilev, the ballet impresario, famously said to Cocteau, "*Etonnez-moi!*" (Astonish me!), which became a motto that would inspire Cocteau for the rest of his life.¹⁷ The surrealist, who searches for other worlds, marvels and astonishments, finds that beauty through revelation.

"What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) ¹⁸

One might ask had this simply been any old pot, "What drugs were you on, Keats?" The poet's rapture, however, might have been an early version of surrealist conceptualizing, posing questions to oneself in a moment of revelation. To experience surrealist revelation requires a child's ability at wonderment but while children are easily surprised because they lack the sophistication that allows them to make comparisons, the world weary adult surrealist must expend some effort in the pursuit.

Being shown a secret truth or witnessing the marvelous, a miracle or experiencing revelation, especially in an odd or irrational way, is at the heart of the surrealist experience. Louis Aragon, the French Surrealist writer, wrote, "What characterizes the miracle, what

proclaims the miraculous, that quality of the marvelous, is undoubtedly a bit of surprise." ¹⁹

Surprise is the spice of life for surrealists and they like their food hot.

"To have original, extraordinary, and perhaps even immortal ideas, one has but to isolate oneself from the world for a few moments so completely that the most commonplace happenings appear to be new and unfamiliar, and in this way reveal their true essence."

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851) ²⁰

Some of the original Surrealists used mind-altering drugs to achieve revelation. Schopenhauer's statement, taken out of context, could be seen to either describe an experience with hallucinogenic drugs or a surrealist's point of view. As an alternative to drugs, Dalí had a pair of spectacles with amber coloured glass chambers in place of lenses and filled them with live insects. It is easy to imagine how viewing the world through such spectacles could lead to hallucinations and create an environment where "... the most commonplace happenings appear to be new and unfamiliar, and in this way reveal their true essence."

Giorgio de Chirico, the Greek Italian Surrealist painter, admired Schopenhauer and described revelation in a similar way: "If one were to imagine the birth of a work of art in an artist's mind, one would grasp the principle of revelation in art, the revelation of a work of art revealing the joy of creation." ²¹

Subjective Perspectives

Automatic writing, invented by Breton, was a technique used by the Surrealists to free the subconscious, to weaken the grip of premeditation and thereby rid the artist of conscious intention in his or her art making. It consisted of spontaneously writing down the first things that came to mind without self-censorship.

Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli once famously joked that one could throw a sponge soaked with colours at a wall, making a spot where a beautiful landscape could be seen (which then prompted Leonardo, his contemporary, to reply that there was a lot one could learn from such smudges but that Botticelli was not a particularly good landscape painter). At the same time Piero di Cosimo was creating magnificent landscapes of equestrian battles that came out of his studies of the vomit-and-spit-covered walls of various institutions. That the mind is capable of seeing the most spectacular visions in such random or uninspiring places is something that crosses the centuries and is part of the artist's special ability that allows us to experience that.

In this way the Surrealist artist Max Ernst created the painterly equivalent of Breton's automatic writing, calling it *frottage*. Ernst would scrape pigment onto a prepared foundation which he would place on uneven surfaces (like floor boards); then do his rubbings, the marks and patterns revealed would then stimulate him to more conscious free drawing. In doing so Ernst created a new kind of landscape in which the actual texture of the environment is incorporated into the artwork and the artist's hallucinatory faculties are stimulated by elements

in the surroundings, allowing works to be created in an ostensibly passive manner. The medium, thereby, served as guide.

The avoidance of cliché was one reason the Surrealists developed automatic writing and *frottage*. Buñuel and Dalí used automatic writing when collaborating on their script for *Un Chien Andalou*: free associating followed by rigorously discarding any image to which they could give meaning; the result, a film that successfully conveyed the logic and syntax of dreams.

Subjectivity is the foundation upon which the other three concerns of surrealism (object, cerebral self, revelation of the marvelous) stand, the entire structure supporting one goal:

"We shall be idealists subscribing to no ideal. The ideal images of surrealism will serve the imminent crisis of consciousness; they will serve Revolution." ²²

Salvador Dalí



Un Chien Andalou

SURREALISM AND THE CINEMA

The *experience* of surrealism in film is basically the same as in painting and literature, the main point of difference being that traditional film studies define the *shot* (not the *object*) as its main focus. The shot is a concrete unit, worked on by the director when shooting a film and in conjunction with the editor afterward; the creative energy first being focused on "making the shot," then on putting the *shots* together in sequence. To experience surrealism in film, however, the *image*, not the shot, is the focus of study. This is because of the power of images to affect our emotions while making us aware of the ideas they represent. In film the image *is* the object. An image can be contained by only one shot while a single shot may contain many images. A good definition of the filmic image could be, "It is the object of our perception of a moment in film when elements come together to say one thing." The more elements (camera placement, lighting, an actor's vocal inflection) that reinforce the image the more intense the emotional effect; and intensified images have the potential to become idealized images, able to provoke a surreal experience.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) the camera pans across the central, exterior courtyard of the protagonist's urban apartment complex; only a few shots, but the images revealed are many: a variety of vignettes of daily life and human behaviours framed by the many windows over-looking the courtyard; and it is these images that impress us more than the camera placements and movements (curiously voyeuristic though they are) and which evoke the feelings that define the experience of the film. In depicting these images Hitchcock, like Magritte, shows people not as individuals but as archetypes: the busty blonde

performing her morning calisthenics; the newlyweds in their day-long love-making; the elderly couple's devotions to their pet dog; the young composer at his piano, straining to find the final notes to complete his concerto; and matronly Miss Lonelyhearts fluffing about her dreary apartment. Through Hitchcock's intense, yet distant, window-framed views and his precise arrangements of the 'objects' within, the artificial, perhaps fatalistic aspects of these characters' lives are revealed. In all this, Hitchcock is surrealist.



Rear Window: Miss Lonelyhearts toasting her imaginary date



Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

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In Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) the wicked witch's poisoned apple, so perfectly formed, so startlingly red, is the ideal, the archetype, 'Apple'. In Disney's *Pinocchio* (1939) the Blue Fairy, with her radiant complexion, is an icon of 'Beauty' as much as Belle in Cocteau's *La Belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946). Disney was not a surrealist but his images of childhood fantasy can be as surreal as those of Cocteau. (Cocteau was not an official member of the original Surrealists but surrealism was integral to his artistic sensibility.)



Rita Hayworth's finger nails (*Blood and Sand*)

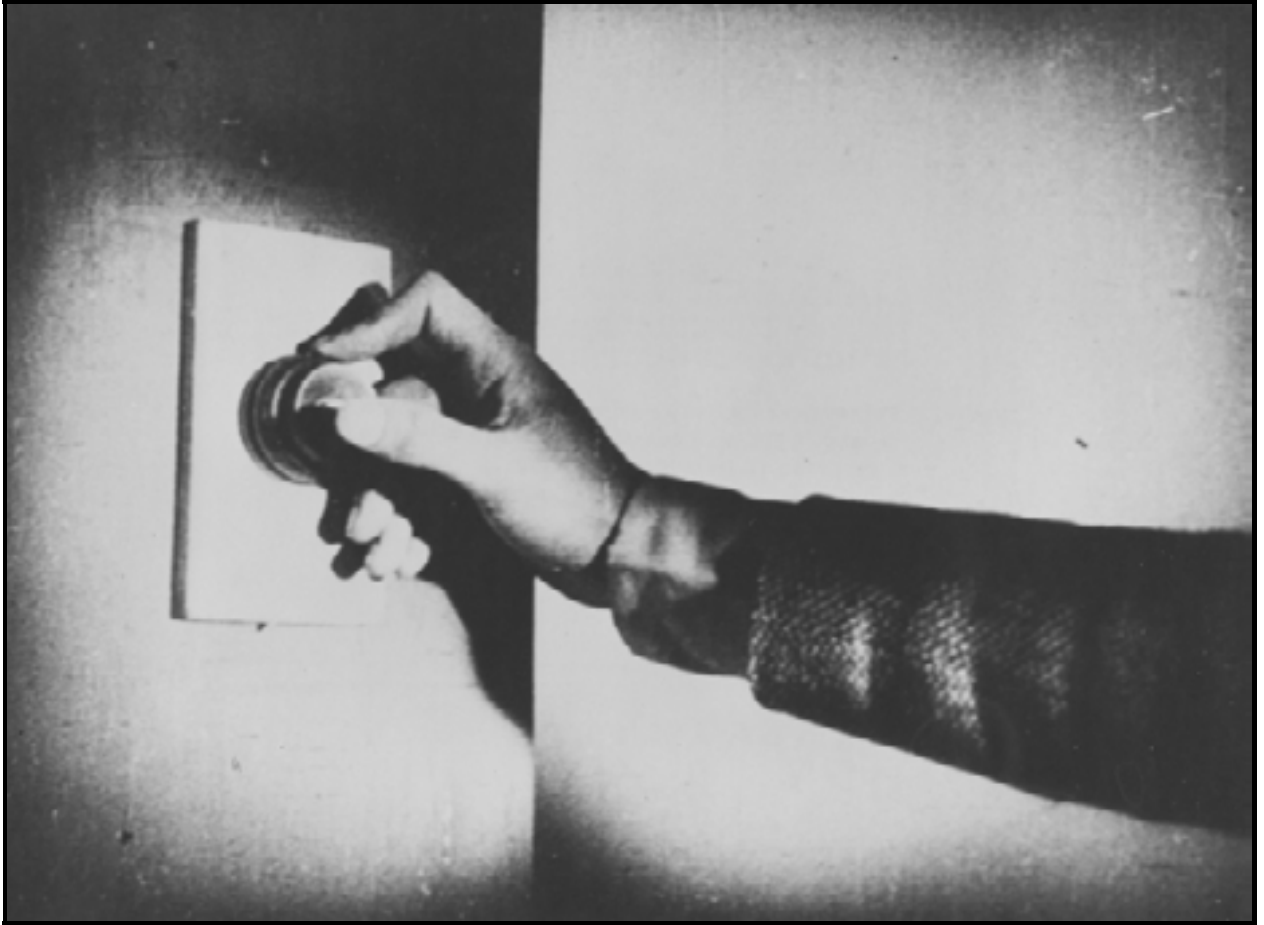
For the surrealist, perfection is the *raison d'être* and exaggeration the means to it. American film and theatre wizard Rouben Mamoulian's *Blood and Sand* (1941) shows a masterly use of exaggeration – the exaggeration of colour – to create surrealism in film. In this Spanish romance set in the world of bullfighting a gamut of objects (a satin cushion, matador's cape, the painted fingernails of the femme fatale), all specifically highlighted, are so intensely red that the effect is more than decorative, goes beyond the symbolic and becomes an

emotional force, like a rhythm of colour pulsing through the film. The director's emulation of the styles of famous Spanish painters supports the exaggeration as well.

Colour, however, is only one filmic device which, when exaggerated, can produce the surreal ideal; camera speed (slow motion, fast motion, pixilation), sound (volume, distortion) are others. When many methods of exaggeration are used together then a cohesive, consistent *look* is created; and this is something for which the cinema is ideally suited. Although there may be a multitude of looks one could define, two significant looks, both relating to Dalí's theory of systematized confusion, are worth investigating: clutter and its opposite, minimalism – but more of this later.

For the surrealist, highly sensitive to the presence of the irrational (the irrational as revealed in marvelous juxtapositions, actual or imagined), film is a rich source of surrealism. In *Un Chien Andalou* a close-up of a hand pressing a doorbell is followed by a close-up of a pair of hands sticking through cutout holes in a wall, vigorously shaking a cocktail shaker. This irrational juxtaposition is both of image and sound (bearing in mind this is a silent film); and Buñuel, who credits his viewers with intelligence, makes of it a mind game for those open to noting the relationship between "ring" (or "ding-dong") and "rattle".





Un Chien Andalou



Un Chien Andalou

A humorous example of surrealist juxtaposition in film occurs in *Brats* (1930), an early talkie Laurel and Hardy short where Stan and Ollie are obnoxious six-year-olds (children of a married couple played by their own, adult selves). The furniture and props are super-sized so the "kids" appear appropriately small and the humour comes from this juxtaposition of objects of exaggerated size.

In her seminal book on the German Expressionist cinema, *The Haunted Screen*, Lotte Eisner discusses the stylistic hallmarks of the expressionist actor, illustrating with photographs of actors in moments of frenzy or hysteria. She notes that "Expressionist Man wears his heart painted on his chest,"²³ appropriately, because the expressionist world is a surface world. If one were to similarly describe the stylistic hallmarks of the surrealist actor, whose world is one *beneath* the surface, it might be that of Marlene Dietrich in a scene from *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), Josef von Sternberg's wild take on Tsarist Russia. Dietrich, as Catherine the Great, watches a hole being drilled through the wall of her chamber (by the mad Grand Duke Peter in the adjoining room), the very spot of the drill's emergence being through the eye of an icon painted on her side of the wall. The actress tilts her head a little to one side, her lips slightly parted, her eyes round with astonishment so that her face expresses the look of 'surprise' *par excellence*. With the cock of her head initiating a spiral movement, von Sternberg cuts to the object of her gaze: the enormously long drill, in close-up, spiraling directly toward her (and viewer); Catherine now looking almost hypnotized as the drill pierces the icon's eye. Dietrich's expression (I like to call it "the Gaze of Amazement") on discovering she is being spied upon in

this manner, might equally mirror that of the viewer who, simultaneously, is having his or her own truth revealed: the beauty and complexity of these images.



The Scarlet Empress: Eye of the icon



Marlene Dietrich's surrealist gaze (*The Scarlet Empress*)

With revelation, usually, comes truth. It may then (or may not) be surprising to discover surrealist resonances in revelations of irrational juxtaposition in two Hollywood biblical films: *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). In the former, after his first encounter with the burning bush, Moses, though previously clean-shaven, appears bearded (out of the blue, like the man in *Un Chien Andalou*). The beard grows longer and greyer after each further encounter with God until it is snow white; so patriarchal it looks like a small rug hanging

from his lower jaw. Certainly, as time passes one ages, and, certainly, hair grows and eventually can turn white; however, this Moses' metamorphosis is truly extreme. Then there are the plagues.

We are amazed by each plague cast on the Egyptians by Moses with all the panache of a master music hall magician, but it is Moses' final demonstration of God's wrath, the parting of the Red Sea, which lives in the memory. The sea is turned into an immense wall of water rising high up above and behind the fleeing Israelites and, seemingly, turns in on itself in a continuous moving loop. It is less the technical wizardry that astonishes – and the back projection is obvious by today's standards – than the irrational juxtaposition of the image and, perhaps, the fact that a filmmaker (Cecil B. DeMille) had the audacity to attempt such literal depiction.

The irrational is present in George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* because the characters seem out of place in their environment (like Delvaux's subjects waiting for their trains to arrive). Exteriors were shot in Monument Valley, Utah, whose iconic, stark buttes and wide open spaces are so familiar to viewers of Hollywood (especially John Ford) westerns. This creates a subliminal irrational juxtaposition: the image of the lone Westerner beside the depiction of Christ. Acted by Max von Sydow, in his first American role after playing dour Swedes for Ingmar Bergman, this Christ is no mere modern Everyman, no existential antihero, like the archetypal Westerner (a man who has "... Gotta do what a man's gotta do"). Von Sydow truly *is* the Son of God, *being* his character even more than clichéd contemporary superheroes ("Arnold Schwarzenegger *is* The Terminator"); and when, in full-frontal shots, he stonily intones, "He that

is without sin amongst you, let him cast the first stone," it is a truism so starkly uttered it defies cliché.

Clutter and Minimalism

Defining clutter and minimalism as *looks* clearly differentiates these opposite ways of perceiving and arranging reality. A film, or painting, with a cluttered look is like a tropical rainforest of dense vegetation, profuse insect life and humidity; while a film, or painting, with a minimalist look is like the barren landscape of a desert where night skies are clear and starry.

Examples of clutter in painting go back to the works of 16th-century Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder, whose images are a riot of peasants (animals, and various odd creatures) busy in their myriad activities. His works are now seen in terms of surrealism by even conventional art historians. A contemporary of Brueghel's, though entirely different stylistically, was Italian Mannerist, Agnolo Bronzino, whose *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (1546) also achieves the surrealist ideal of clutter. We see Venus at the centre, surrounded by three furiously active figures: Time, unfurling a bolt of blue cloth; Folly, preparing to toss a bouquet; and Cupid, embracing Venus; each figure's hands in expressive gesticulation. From the scene's recesses other images emerge: a man convulsed in agony; theatrical masks; a dove; the lower half of a lion's body; the seemingly disembodied head of a woman – all fragments, crammed into the frame, creating a frenzied image.



Systematized confusion, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, Agnolo Bronzino

Film directors Luis Buñuel and Josef von Sternberg, both masters of clutter, take this sensibility to the level of surrealism. In Buñuel there is the systematized confusion of his disorderly rooms (*Un Chien Andalou*, *L'Age d'Or*). In the former, could anything be more cluttered than the woman's modest bed-sit? Has there ever been such a small room with so much going on in it? Besides the battling couple, at one point it contains two baby-grand pianos, each draped with a bloody donkey carcass, which are hauled across the room by the man, while, for good measure, two startled *padres* cling to his tow ropes. Perhaps that room's clutter is rivaled by the elegant salon in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (*The Exterminating Angel*) (1962), where the obsessive guests engage in a multitude of bizarre activities: building a bonfire to roast the sheep which have wandered in; hacking up a cello for firewood; manicuring their nails; playing the piano; one society matron inspecting the raw chicken legs she carries in her handbag. Buñuel's interest in the disorder of existence, made manifest by clutter, was ongoing throughout his career. Another group of house guests, in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), Buñuel moves from their salon to a theatre stage where they can enact their obsessive rituals in full public view.

In *The Blue Angel* (*Der Blaue Engel*, 1929) Josef von Sternberg clutters the tiny stage where femme fatale, Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich), sings and struts. She is backed-up by a group of overweight, over-the-hill chorus girls dressed in starched crinolines; behind them hang cutout clouds (the scenery). It's a lot of fluff for such a small space. In *Morocco* (1930) Dietrich, a cabaret artist again, performs in a larger venue to a packed house where the women patrons, exhausted by the desert heat, languorously fan themselves throughout her act. There is a sense

of density in the room you could cut with a knife. Another cluttered von Sternberg cabaret, in *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), includes pelicans (and why not?). In *The Shanghai Express* (1932) the hordes of China are so thick they impede the movements of the main characters as they walk through the city streets.



The Devil Is a Woman: Systematized confusion, with pelicans

Two Surrealist painters, Magritte and de Chirico, are masters of the minimalist look. Magritte's everyday objects²⁴ would not have become so iconographic had they been heavily decorated; for example, the simplicity of the giant green apple in the otherwise empty room. Another of his paintings is of an enormous, disembodied human eye with blue sky and clouds replacing cornea and iris, creating a space where the viewer can see to infinity. De Chirico, notable for his cityscapes of quasi-ancient Greek architecture and vast, barren piazzas, captures the essence of sparsity and emptiness. If humans populate his locations they are usually single figures, a solitary couple or, simply, a monumental statue.



Mystery and Melancholy of a Street, Giorgio de Chirico

Light, as well as emptiness, is an important element for these painters of sparsity because light brings with it clarity, and we see this in de Chirico's cityscapes, depicted as they are in a kind of half-light (the light of an eclipse, as Cocteau once noted), a low sun casting long shadows; and in Magritte's cloud-dotted blue skies with their Vermeer-like limpidity.

Dalí, whose theory of systematized confusion found form in the profusion of irrational objects he painted, paradoxically, illuminated his objects with a clear, simple light. He had studied Vermeer intensively in his youth and in his first venture into film, *Un Chien Andalou*, on which he worked with Luis Buñuel, he paid homage to the Dutch master in the shot of the woman reading a book in which, as seen by the viewer, there is a full-page picture of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (1669). The image of the woman in the film, upright in her chair and as engrossed in her reading as is Vermeer's lacemaker in her lace making, we could entitle *Lady Reading* or *The Reader*.²⁵ While *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* were collaborations between Buñuel and Dalí, ultimately they have more of Buñuel than Dalí in them. Whether this resulted from issues of logistics, personality or aesthetics, the fact is these films established Buñuel, not Dalí, with the film career.





Homage to clarity and precision (*Un Chien Andalou*)

Before looking at film's master of the minimalist look, Alfred Hitchcock, it is worth exploring how one subject, or scene, as portrayed by different artists, can illustrate the issues of clutter and minimalism. The subject is the last meal of Jesus. The fresco, *The Last Supper* (1498), by Leonardo da Vinci, is the prototype to which all subsequent portrayals of this subject must be compared; and it exemplifies clutter: the disciples bunched together, highly animated, gesticulating, the table covered with food. When Buñuel recreates this scene in *Viridiana* (1961) using the same frontal view, the same long shot, he shows a similar affinity for clutter, with gesticulating actors (playing cripples and miscreants) and a table laden with food. When the characters break their feast to pose for a photo, they assume the classic tableau, which is captured in a freeze frame; and da Vinci's painting is recreated with hilarious effect.

Dalí's painting *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955) shows his Vermeer-like clarity and light, illuminating a barren, almost futuristic re-interpretation of Renaissance perspective: the stone table has only three items on it; it is minimalism *in extremis*. There is a similarly barren version of the event in George Stevens' film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. These disciples sit erect, immobile; the colours are subdued, almost black-and-white; the table, practically bare. The Stevens and Dalí images have the cold, clinical look of 20th-century Protestant art while the da Vinci and Buñuel versions have the sumptuous look of traditional Catholic art. A comparison of these two looks would be like comparing the baroque church altars of early Spanish America, with their encrustations of carved wooden saints with the churches of contemporary American TV evangelists whose modernist glass temples are as bereft of adornment as community bingo halls. Could we label this Catholic Clutter versus Protestant

Precision? Whatever, da Vinci and Stevens demonstrate their faith, while Buñuel opts for satire; as for Dalí, who knows? Through different *exaggerated* looks an identical subject, or scene, can convey different ideas, even opposite ideas such as reverence and irreverence.



Da Vinci's prototype



Buñuel's *Viridiana*



The Sacrament of the Last Supper, Salvador Dalí



The Greatest Story Ever Told

Double Images and Genres of Painting

A moment on screen when a famous painting is recreated, as seen above, always evokes the surreal – regardless of the look. The imprint of famous images is so strong on our psyches, that if one goes through life believing "the last supper" looked as da Vinci painted it,

then the shock will be great when we are confronted with a different representation. When this happens a double image is created in the mind's eye. This idea of the double image relates to an aspect of Dalí's theory of "paranoiac activity" where one object can represent another object without the slightest physical change in either. The filmic equivalent, while not identical, produces its own kind of paranoiac effect in the viewer because as the second, altered, version of the familiar image appears on screen, in the mind of the viewer, where the original image remains fixed, there is a conflict of visions; an irrational juxtaposition, in fact.

Buñuel also used this device in the first shot of *Tristana* (1970). In a long shot of Toledo, Spain, from the same angle as in El Greco's famous painting *View of Toledo* (1597), where the sky is a stormy blue, the foreground lush greens, Buñuel colours his version in browns. Same city, same view, but something is different.

Not only have paintings of Old Masters been double-imaged in film but also the work of comic book artists. Over the past thirty years many characters from American comic books have been replicated on film (Dick Tracy, Superman, Spiderman, The Hulk, *et al*) so that entire films, not just images, seem double-imaged. Graphic novels, as well, have been adapted to film in this way. It is, however, more particularly the films of Samuel Fuller (see later chapter), the American B-film master from an earlier era, which have a *comic book look* while not being actual adaptations of comic books, that are of interest in terms of surrealism.

The idea of landscape has a special place in the surrealist sensibility. In painting a landscape can serve as a representation of a specific mood or emotion where the land (sea or sky) can be endowed with character of its own. A bucolic English countryside by Constable, a windswept,

cloudy Netherlands scene by Ruisdael, these landscapes have powerful emotive qualities which can be linked to national character or individual personality traits; for instance, the serenity of English middle class life (at that particular moment), or the rude earthiness of Dutch peasantry. When, however, a landscape creates disharmony, usually due to the presence of an irrational element (as in the paintings of Delvaux), we feel the presence of the surreal.

In films, dream scenes allow landscape to play a part in evoking surrealism. Buster Keaton's silent comedy *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) has one such sequence. In this memorable film Keaton plays a movie theatre projectionist who falls asleep on the job; then dreams a series of misadventures in which he is transposed into the shots of the film he is projecting. What the viewer sees is a procession of changing locales as backdrops to Keaton; at first all looks quite normal (Keaton, in bathing suit, standing on a rock at the seashore), but his dive into the water has him plunging instead headlong into a snow bank (a wintry scene replacing the summery seaside). Undaunted, Keaton proceeds with his explorations, always action-inappropriate, as the irrational juxtapositions come fast and furiously.

Josef von Sternberg's seven collaborations with Marlene Dietrich play on the idea of character-in-a-landscape, where each film can be viewed as an exaggerated, surreal landscape, each with its own personality. There is the *mystery* of the Orient in *Shanghai Express*, the *madness* of Tsarist Russia in *The Scarlet Empress* and the *fatalism* of Spain in *The Devil Is a Woman*. Dietrich, the protagonist in each, moves through each film, from scene to scene, as if she were the only sane element in these off-kilter worlds; she, the calm eye of the hurricane.

Another painting genre, still life, can evoke the surrealist sensibility. Oddly, the French term for the genre, *nature morte* (dead nature), has a negative take to it. Perhaps the French focus on the inevitable decay of an arrangement of cut flowers or the rot that awaits a twist of lemon rind, rather than the essence of these things that once lived. Regardless of whether this genre's subtext is Life or Death, still life's focus is on the *object as an arrangement*; and the masters of still life in film are Buñuel and Hitchcock.

The 'frozen' Last Supper moment in *Viridiana* is not only a great double image, as noted, but also a great example of still life in film. Buñuel 'froze' other images, too: In *L'Age d'Or* when a dignitary shoots himself, his body appears up on the ceiling, looking like a fly stuck to a board with a pin.



L'Age d'Or

In *Le mort en ce Jardin* (1956), in a freeze frame in reverse, a Champs Elysées street scene depicted on a postcard, held in the hand of one of the characters, springs to life before our eyes, the boulevard's traffic now moving. While these images are not still life in the conventional (vase-of-flowers) sense, by their meticulous arrangement and framing they convey the *essence* of still life.

Alfred Hitchcock's films also provide a rich source of filmic still life: the window-framed characters of *Rear Window*, while not static, are precisely arranged and framed, seeming fated to repeat their daily routines; *North by Northwest* (1959) with its chase over Mt. Rushmore, where the protagonists pause by the giant ears and nostrils of American Presidents – 'still lives' exaggerated by the irrational juxtaposition of Presidential appendages; and *Psycho* (1960), the shot of bronze hands bric-a-brac on Norman Bates' mother's dressing table, given added *oomph* by a subtle camera movement, is a stunning image of deathly stillness.



Hitchcockian still life (*North by Northwest*)

Other Isms

Comparing the aesthetic of film surrealism with film expressionism, looking at how they are experienced, is revealing. Von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* and Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1942 – 1946) are both set in Tsarist Russia, both cluttered with baroque imagery, both stylized to the *nth* degree and both scored with über-dramatic music. Eisenstein's film, however, lacks the irrational juxtapositions of von Sternberg's. In *The Scarlet Empress* the main irrational juxtaposition is that of the protagonist (Dietrich), goddess of sanity, amid the mad environment of her court. Not only must Catherine contend with the crazy Grand Duke but a variety of other nutty fruitcakes (a stingy priest, an effeminate hairdresser, a regiment of horny guardsmen). In *Ivan the Terrible*, on the other hand, Ivan appears as mad as those surrounding him. Ivan fits in with the curiosities of his court, so irrational juxtaposition is not an issue.

It is also worth comparing the films' scenes of religious ceremony: Catherine's wedding (*The Scarlet Empress*) and the scene (in *Ivan the Terrible*) where Ivan humbles himself before the Metropolitan of Russian Orthodoxy. In the former the viewer is transported into another world by the droning, sacred-like music of Rubenstein's *Kammenoi Ostrow* (*Angelic Dream*) and the extreme close-ups of Dietrich's face as an incense burner swings back and forth in front of her, a flickering candle flame highlighting her porcelain skin. A kind of hypnosis seems to be happening (to Catherine as well as to the viewer). The religious ceremony in *Ivan the Terrible* is very much less emotionally manipulative with the view mostly in long shot to let the camera take in the horde of worshippers in the cavernous Cathedral. This scene is more

about the spectacle of an event than the interior states of its characters. As noted, the difference between surrealism and expressionism in the cinema seems to be that surrealism is an internalized sensibility while expressionism, heart painted on the outside for all to see, is an externalized one.

The stylization of *Ivan the Terrible* is too symbolic and obvious to allow surrealism to exist. Seen in long shot at the opening of Part Two, the men of the Polish Court stand and confer, looking like chessmen placed on the black-and-white checkered floor. The placement of court figures in *The Scarlet Empress* (with its own black-and-white checkered floor) is less formal, less static and, so, less symbolic. In this film members of the court may be seen lurking in alcoves but when they venture out it is of their own accord compared to Eisenstein's pawns. Where von Sternberg conveys the menace of the court in a venomous character's shifty glance or the wild eyes of the mad Grand Duke as he drills merrily into Catherine's chamber, Eisenstein quite literally has huge, disembodied eyes painted on the walls of Ivan's palace (to signify menace). Because of the overt symbolism in *Ivan the Terrible* (overt, but not flaunted – which could give it a sense of humour) there is no opportunity for the viewer to self-question or conceptualize. It is a work of expressionism and as brilliant, striking and bizarre as it is *Ivan the Terrible* is not particularly *surreal*.





Ivan the Terrible



Publicity still from *The Scarlet Empress*

If surrealism is not at home within a framework of expressionism, it sits comfortably within a naturalistic one. We can see this in a comparison of the two dreams in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). The filmmaker had asked Dalí, then at the start of his assault on the American market, to make a surreal dream for this film about psychoanalysis, and Dalí created a scene full of the trademarks of his paintings: giant, disembodied eyes, objects that sagged and drooped, sinuous lines, long shadows and deep perspectives. While Hitchcock, too, had a feeling for

shadows and deep perspectives and shared Dalí's fondness for visual clarity, the end result was a dream more Dalí than Hitchcock; a painter's dream more than a filmmaker's, too obviously 'surreal' to succeed as film.

It is the second dream, created by Hitchcock, alone, that is the more disturbing one, in fact, the one with a more convincing sense of the surreal, because in it the symbolism is less obvious and the devices are more concealed; a surrealist sensibility within a naturalistic (or more realistic) environment. In this dream the protagonist, a psychiatric patient, recalls a childhood incident when he was partly responsible for the death of his younger brother. We are shown an imposing stone building with a wide sloping ledge along the stairway in front of it, the brothers poised to use the ledge as a slide: the older boy sitting at the top, the younger one at the bottom. There is a spiked iron paling at street level. Shown in a heightened perspective, with long shadows, the action unfolds: older brother slides down ledge, feet pushing younger brother off; younger brother is impaled by spike. In shots before the accident the spikes are shown looming large in the foreground and the ledge cuts a sharp diagonal to the background where high stone arches add a further feeling of surreal depth (the architectural depth of de Chirico); as well, the older boy's feet appear exaggeratedly huge in the foreground compared with the 'tiny' figure of the younger brother at the bottom, in the background, awaiting his fate.





Hitchcock's dream



Hitchcock's dream



Dalí's dream



Dalí's dream

In *Hitchcock*, François Truffaut's book of interviews, Hitchcock states, "The real reason (that he hired Dalí) was that I wanted to convey the dream with great visual sharpness and clarity, sharper than the film itself. I wanted Dalí because of the architectural sharpness of his work. De Chirico has the same quality, you know, the long shadows, the infinity of distance, and the converging lines of perspective ... My idea was to shoot the Dalí dream scene in the open air so that the whole thing, photographed in real sunshine, would be terribly sharp." ²⁶ In

the end the scene had to be shot in the studio and it was only years later, in *Vertigo* (1958), that Hitchcock was able to completely capture the feeling of de Chirico. Perhaps, had the Dalí dream been shot in sunlight, as Hitchcock initially planned, it would have achieved a truer surrealism.

Ironically, de Chirico had similarly been confronted with the problems of light when, after years studying the painters of the 14th and 15th-centuries, he realized that painting in egg tempera, as they had done, was superior to painting in oils, as did de Chirico's contemporaries. He came to the conclusion that egg tempera could capture light and luster better than oils and he lamented the French Impressionists, who tried to capture light by technique, alone, when, so thought de Chirico, the very paint they used contained the dullness they sought to avoid. Both Hitchcock and de Chirico knew the importance of light in conveying their respective surrealist visions. That a slight alteration of one filmic element – such as light – can impact so significantly on visual art's effectiveness is an indication of the subtlety of the surrealist sensibility.

